

## **Dorothy S. Himstead**

### **(1895-1988)**

*First woman to serve on the Montgomery County Council*

Dorothy S. Himstead was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1895. She grew up in Evanston, Illinois, where her father was professor at Northwestern University. She attended that university for her undergraduate studies. After marrying Ralph Himstead, she lived in Mt. Vernon, Iowa, and in Syracuse, New York, where her husband was a law professor. Dorothy Himstead taught French at Illinois College, at Cornell College in Mt. Vernon, and at Syracuse University. In 1934, she joined the League of Women Voters, becoming the President of the League of Women Voters of Onondaga County, New York, from 1934 to 1936.

In 1936, Himstead moved to the Washington area, where her husband was offered a new position at the American Association of University Professors headquartered in Washington D.C. After moving to Montgomery County, Himstead became involved with the League of Women Voters, holding various positions. She spoke publicly on issues related to voting, and local and national issues. Himstead wrote many brochures and pamphlets for the League on a variety of issues ranging from tax studies to local government. She also served as Chair of different committees, including the Status of Women and Local Government. Himstead was President of the League of Women Voters from 1946 to 1948.

Himstead, with the League of Women Voters, was very involved in the Charter Movement in Montgomery County. From its beginnings in 1776, Montgomery County functioned under the county commissioner system that kept most of the local power in Annapolis. All local legislation was passed and decided in the General Assembly at Annapolis. In the 1930s, the Montgomery County Civic Federation began a movement for a Home Rule Charter that would provide more direct local power. The Civic Federation recommended that an outside group would make a study of the effectiveness of the county government. The Brookings Institute conducted such a study in 1941. The study recommended that the county had outgrown its form of government and it advised the county to take advantage of the Home Rule Amendment to the Constitution that allowed the county to adopt a charter providing for home rule. The Brookings study would become the focus of an intense controversy for many years.

As a consequence of the study, a Charter Committee was formed. Nearly half of its members were League of Women Voters members. The Committee began a mobilization in 1942 to get the charter on the ballot. In 1948, Montgomery County became the first county in Maryland to adopt a home rule charter.

The new charter established a Council-Manager form of government. In 1949, six men and a woman, Dorothy Himstead, were elected to the first County Council, making her the first woman to serve on the Montgomery County Council. Furthermore, Himstead was the first woman in Maryland to serve on a local governing body. "I'm very proud to say, I was the first woman in Maryland elected to a local government job," Himstead said in an interview in 1972. "They didn't know whether to call me Councilwoman or Councilman."

One year after the establishment of the Council, Montgomery County was honored by the National Municipal League. "We were so successful," Himstead confided in the same interview, "that we were the first county in the United States to get the title All American Municipality." Himstead served on the Montgomery County Council from 1949 to 1950.

During her tenure on the Council, Himstead played a significant role in the creation of the county public library system. Upon her initiative, in 1950, the Council passed a bill establishing the Department of Public Libraries. By 1952, there were seven branch libraries with three Bookmobiles and a Central Depository in Gaithersburg.

Himstead lived in Montgomery County until 1957, when she moved to Madison, Connecticut. She became the editor of the town newspaper The Madison Shoreline Times, a position that she held for seven years. After retiring, she continued as a columnist for the paper. She also became a member of the Board of the Salvation Army, the American Association of University Women, and the Madison Historical Society. She died on June 25, 1988.

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#### **SOURCES:**

- Montgomery County Archives
- Montgomery County, Maryland. Our History and Government, Rockville, Maryland: Montgomery County Government (1999)